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ABSTRACT

This paper described the events and results of a workshop on Native American symbolism presented to educators and held in Kansas City, Missouri. The presenter maintained that some of the most crucial problems facing U.S. educators and students are caused by racial misunderstandings, and that the universality of artistic expression can be a vehicle for cross-cultural and multi-cultural dialogue. It was stressed that the exploration of Native-American imagery should be part of any art curriculum. However, it was argued, when Native-American art is studied, the past is usually emphasized. Romantic misconceptions of Indians as non-technical, stone-age artisans dominate the literature, thereby reinforcing the tendency to dismiss the evolving, contemporary Native-American culture. The workshop offered participants the opportunity to express their feelings via Native-American symbolism. Participants first viewed an intertribal powwow videotape; the powwow was presented as an aesthetic experience as a time for learning and carrying on a rich cultural heritage. The symbolic significance of the appearance of the participant flag bearers, singers, drummers, and dancers as they entered the powwow arena, was explained. The videotape was followed by a slide show that featured works emphasizing the present and future direction of Native-American art. These included Northwest Coast masks carved in the 1980s, contemporary crafts, and paintings by Fritz Scholder. Participants then created their own symbolic images, during which time, sage, an Indian herb/incense, permeated the air. Some of the works created are described in the report. This method of introducing Native-American culture, it was concluded, is respectful of tradition. (KM)

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Exploring Native American Symbolism

Phoebe Dufrene

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Abstract

Exploring Native American Symbolism

Since some of the most crucial problems facing U.S. eductors and students are caused by cultural and racial misunderstandings, the universality of artistic expression can be a vehicle for cross-cultural and multi-cultural dialogue. This paper is a sharing of a Native American based experiential workshop and an explanation of traditional and modern Native American symbolism. Despite regional and tribal diversity, there exists a spiritual unity among Native Americans that is manifested in the arts.

The exploration of Native American imagery, our country's indigenous culture, should be part of any art curriculum from K-higher education. Unfortunately, when Native American art is studied or explored in the studio, the past is usually emphasized. Romantic misconceptions of Indians as non-technological, stoneage artisans dominate the literature, thereby reinforcing the tendency to dismiss the evolving, contemporary Native American culture.

With these issues in mind, the writer (of Powhatan Indian descent) presented a workshop at the 1990 NAEA conference entitled, "Exploring Native American Symbolism." It was an experiential workshop that offered participants the opportunity to expres their feelings via Native American symbolism.

During the beginning of the presentation participants viewed an intertribal powwow videotape made by the writer and slides of contemporary Native American art that included traditional and modern motifs. The middle of the workshop was devoted to a studio experience while listening to Native American flute music. Sage, an Indian herb/incense permeated the air. Concluding the workshop, participants shared their feelings visually and verbally.

Exploring Native American Symbolism

Introduction

There are approximately 500 Native American tribes still in existence in North America. Each tribe has their own language or a language that is part of a linguistic group such as the Algonquin, Siouan, or Muskhogean. In the hundreds of Native American languages there is no word that comes close to the Western definition of art (Highwater, 1982). Native American art is seldom "art for arts sake." Both traditional and contemporary thinking does not separate art and life, what is beautiful and what is functional. Art, beauty, and spirituality are intertwined in the routine of living.

The Native American view of the spiritual and physical world uses symbols freely to enrich daily life and ceremonies. Symbols are protectors and reminders of the living universe, bridging the gap between the spiritual and physical realm. Symbols are used in ritual performances to portray the power of the cosmos (Hait, 1989).

Life sustaining activities are used as themes in Native American art and in art expressions around the world.

> "Life sustaining needs, activities, and phases are areas of concern that find expression in themes found in art throughout the world. Themes of procreation, security, fear, and domination find expression in fertility figures, ceremonial items used to assuage the gods, the decorated battle gear of soldiers, and the portable wealth of jewelry used for body adornment. Art functions to mark the importance and meanings of individuals, activities, and environments."[1]

Since some of the most crucial problems facing U.S. educators and students are caused by cultural and racial misunderstandings, the universality of artistic expression can be a vehicle for cross-cultural and multi-cultural dialogue.

1. Hamblen, K. (1986, Fall). A universal-relative approach to the study of cross-cultural art. *Journal of Multi-cultural and Cross-cultural Research in Art Education*, *4* (1): 69-77. (p.74)

The exploration of Native American imagery, our country's indigenous culture, should be part of any art curriculum, from K-higher education. Unfortunately, when Native American art is studied or explored in the studio, the past is usually emphasized. Romantic misconceptions of Indians as non-technological, stoneage artisans dominate the literature, thereby reinforcing the tendency to dismiss the evolving, contemporary Native American culture.

1990 NAEA Conference

With these issues in mind, I presented a workshop at the 1990 NAEA Conference titled, "Exploring Native American Symbolism." It was an experiential workshop that offered participants the opportunity to express their feelings via Native American symbolism.

During the beginning of the presentation participants viewed an intertribal powwow videotape that I had made and also viewed slides of contemporary Native American art that included traditional and modern motifs. The middle of the workshop was devoted to a studio experience while listening to Native American flute music. Sage, an Indian herb/incense for purification, permeated the air. Concluding the workshop, participants shared their feelings verbally and visually. I would like to share with readers some of the results of this experience and explain some of the traditional and contemporary symbolism explored in the workshop.

The Powwow as an Aesthetic Experience

Powwows are intertribal festive occasions where Native American people come together to dance, sing, tell stories, listen to traditional music, eat traditional foods, and purchase arts and crafts. Powwows renew the old ways and preserve indigenous heritage. Often, powwows bring families together who may live apart throughout the year. The purposes are many and vary from place to place but overall a powwow is a Pan-Indian experience (intertribal Native American culture).

Powwows are more than social events. They are a time of learning and carrying on a rich culture heritage. There is spiritual significance in the dances, songs, customs observed, and preparations for the event. A powwow provides an opportunity for our young to learn from our

elders and carry on traditions. For some communities, the powwow has become a yearly culmination of religious and cultural expression.

Each day's festivities begins with a "grand entry" that brings together dancers of all categories and ages in a common traditional dance. The arena is an assembly of bold colors, ribbons, frnged shawls, feathers and jingling bells. Children and adults move to a toe-step rhythm with the drum. The dancers enter the arena from the eastern direction signifying the beginning of life. They dance circling the arena until the last dancer has entered and the song has ended.

First in the arena are the Flag Bearers followed by any honored individuals or elders. Next are the Head Dancers leading in all the other dancers. The traditional men dancers enter first followed by the grass dancers and fancy or bustle dancers. The women traditional dancers come next, followed by the jingle dancers and then the fancy or shawl dancers. Usually both groups enter the arena from the eldest to the youngest and oldest dance style to the newest.

Powwow singers/drummers are integral figures in contemporary Indian culture. Without them, there would not be any Indian dancing. Originally songs and chants were in the native language of the singers and expressed themes such as war and conquest, honor and family, religion, joy, and mourning. As various tribes gathered together, they would share their songs, often changing the songs so singers of different tribes could join in. With these changes, came the use of "vocables" to replace the words of the old songs. Thus, some songs today are sung in vocables having no words. But they still have special meaning to those who know the songs. Some songs are still sung in native languages and are either newly composed or revivals of old songs. These songs remind Indians of their old customs and rich heritage (Snyder, 1990).

The drum is much more than a musical instrument to Native Americans. It is considered sacred and must be cared for in a prescribed manner. It is a tie to the traditional Indian life style. Before beginning to drum, the drummers/singers toss sacred tobacco leaves on the drum's skin. The use of tobacco for prayer and purification is common among all tribes. It has been traded and shared since pre-Columbian times.

The drum is a very important symbol to Native people. Its sound represents the heartbeat, Mother Earth and all of the nations. The drum's circular shape represents the unity of Native people and oneness with the universe. The circle is a sacred symbol in all Native cultures.

The most common drum is the traditional hide drum which is made by stretching a hide over a wood frame and lacing the two sides together. The singers control the pitch of the drum by warming the hide near a small fire. Elders believe that drum songs are heard by the spirit world.

There are many different types of songs and the singers are expected to know a song for every type of dance. The songs are memorized orally and not written down.

Among the Native people of the Plains and the Great Lakes, women do not sit at the drum. However, in some California and Virginia tribes, women do participate in drumming. Women usually sing with the drum, joining in at certain parts of the verse an octave higher than the male singers.

Dancing is another element of the powwow experience. Most dances at powwows are "social" dances, i.e., non-religious. At some powwows dancing is for competition prizes. Dancers wishing to compete for prizes wear identifying numbers. The head man and head lady dancers guide and direct. They are the first to begin dancing on each song and other dancers wait in respect until the head man and head lady begin dancing.

The head veteran dancer is responsible for carrying in the Eagle staff at Grand Entry and for retiring the flags before sunset. He retrieves any eagle feathers dropped by the dancers. Eagle feathers are the most important part of any costume. Eagles represent all other birds and are viewed as messengers to the Great Spirit. Among all tribes the eagle feather is accorded the highest respect. A dropped eagle feather represents a fallen warrior who is with us in spirit. The feather is protected while on the ground by the head veteran dancer until a special song is sung to retrieve it.

The main dancing styles seen at powwows are traditional, fancy, jingle dancing, and grass dancing. Some dances originate from a specific tribe and belong to only those people.

The traditional men dancers style and clothing regalia can vary greatly. While the style may vary, each dance has a special meaning or story. Through dance, a story, dream, or event will be acted out.

Grass dancers are identified by long fringes dominating the outfit. The fringes sway back and forth like tall grasses. This style originated from the Plains tribes.

Viewing the powwow dance ground, one will notice different styles of clothing regalia that match certain dance styles. The male straight or traditional dancer is more conservative and expresses his individuality by combining both contemporary and traditional styles in costuming. The male straight or traditional dancer is more conservative and expresses his individuality by combining both contemporary and traditional styles in costuming. Although dance and clothing regalia vary individually depending on tribe or region, there are certain common features such as: fur caps with beaded and silver decoration, cloth or skin leggings, breech clout, bandolier beads worn across the chest, draggers made from long narrow strips of otter hide hanging from the dancers neck and down his back to the ground, and bells or deer hoofs around the knees and ankles. Straight or traditional dancers execute a graceful, dignified dance more closely resembling dance styles of earlier times.

In contrast, the men's fancy dance is energetic and fast paced. It is a combination of contemporary colorful costumes and the fast pace of today with traditions of the past. Regalia consists of a hair roach made of deer tail and pocupine guard hair and worn on the head, bells, and bustles which are arrangements of eagle and turkey feathers worn on the neck and the back. Dancers who lose any part of their regalia must leave the arena and are disqualified from competing in any dance contests.

In all traditional women dances the steps maintain contact with the earth. The dance steps a tradtional woman dancer chooses dpends on tribal origin and personal preference. A popular step is a quick shuffle that is double time to the beat of the drum. The women move around the arena, sometimes in a zig-zag pattern.

The women's traditional dress style also has a great variety. The oldest style of dress and dance is the buckskin dancer. These women have dresses made of buckskin with varying lengths of fringe. Usually the longer the fringe the more likely the dancer's origin is from a Plains tribe. Among woodlands tribes, women tend to wear buckskin dresses with shorter fringe.

Women's cloth dresses originated during contact with European traders. Decorated with shells, elk teeth, silver buttons, and ribbons, they are draped by ceremonial shawls fringed to the ground. Ribbons used to decorate shirts, shawls, skirts, leggings, etc., are appliqued to create geometric or floral designs.

Another popular women's style is jingle dancing. The dresses are made from cloth with hundreds of tin cones attached. A style of dancing popular with younger women is known as the fancy or shawl dance. It is represented by fancy footwork and the flowing movement of the shawl. The shawls are elaborately decorated and have long flowing fringe.

Round dances are social dances in which everyone is invited to participate. Women dance in a side step together clockwise around the arena while the men dance counter-clockwise forming an outside row. The Rabbit Dance and its derivative, the Two Step, are two of the few dances where men and women dance as partners. Women choose their partners and couples hold hands, circle the drum, and step off with the left foot, dragging the right with it in time to the loudness of the drum beats. In the snake dance, dancers follow each other in a single line, moving in and out in a snake-like manner. The line of dancers describes the journey of a large snake through the forest and up the mountains -- coiling up for a rest -- uncoiling and traveling on. The "snake" comes to a river -- section by section he crosses -- down to the smallest tail dancer (Snyder, 1990).

Whether Indian dances are secular or sacred, their foundation is the universal expressive power of movement. Music is considered the breath of life, an organic process rather than a finished product. The purpose of song and dance is ritualistic. Music is valued for its magical power, and its power to invoke special states of mind, artistic visions, symbols and trances (Highwater, 1983).

Contemporary Arts and Symbolism

Most of the slides viewed during the NAEA presentation were from color reproductions in Ralph T. Coe's *Lost and Found Traditions: Native American Art 1965-1985*. These works were selected because they emphasize the present and future direction of Native American art. The art is an affirmation that Indian people and their culture are not "vanishing," extinct, or remnants of stoneage technology.

The Northwest Coast masks carved in the 1980's by artists from the Tingit, Talktan, Haida, and Kwaquitl tribes are revivals of masks carved by their ancestors during the late 19th century and early 20th century. Like most tribes, the Northwest Coast mask carvers are usually men. The masks represent birds, wolves, sun deities, and beings that exist in the spiritual world. some masks represent supernatural healing deities and are used to treat the ill. Masks are also used to pantomine events in the history of particular groups. Whatever their use they are considered sacred objects.

Art objects produced by women are usually decorated with geometric designs. Most Euro-American art historians have described these geometric designs as ornamental.

> "While geometric decoration may appear to be "purely ornamental," there is an abundance of evidence that the designs were charged with cultural content and philosophical meaning, such as the primacy of centering, dynamic balancing of complicated elements within the design field, and striving to harmonize all things in nature. Particularly interesting is the extension of this formal vocabulary to what is probably actualization through representation of spirit-principles -- probably the spirit-helpers of shamans -- in rock engravings, various categories of painting, and masquerades. The use of such geometric equivalences can thus be seen as one way of solving the general problem of how spiritual entities can be depicted or evoked through art."[2]

2. Rubin, A. (1989). *Art as technology: the arts of Africa, Oceania, Native America and southern California*. Beverly Hills, CA: Hillcrest Press. (p. 83)

The use of geometric symbolism is continued today in Pueblo pottery, Sioux quilts, Navajo rugs, Cherokee basketry and intertribal beaded clothing and jewelry. In the Southwest, potters paint geometric designs, deer, birds, flowers, and other motifs that identify their villages. Modern potters such as Maria Montoya Martinez, Lucy Lewis, and Nampeyo created new forms based on old traditions.

The last group of slides represented the work of Fritz Scholder, an internationally recognized Native American artist.

> "Scholder has produced hundreds of paintings that have decimated the naive, romantic, and trite clichés about Indians and Indian culture. His was a fusillade of objective truths bound with passionate subjectivity: *Indian with Beer Can, Screaming Indian, Super Indian No. 2.* These and other works demythicizing the stereotype Indian were received with delight -- and horror."[3]
>
> "The Indians largely became Scholder's symbol of human existence under compromised conditions and allowed him to examine the human capacity to either cope with the pressures of a psychic split -- or crash out."[4]

During the 1960's many contemporary Native American artists who had been trained in Western art techniques rejected traditional Indian formats as too restrictive of personal freedom. The chose to totally assimilate into the Euro-American art world. Other contemporary Native American artists adopted a Pan-Indian nationalism that re-affirmed Indian values and criticized Western society. Politically conscious Indian artists used their art to express unity with other oppressed peoples. But there have always been artists who continued the art traditions that date back to early European contact. These lively debates about the direction of contemporary Native American art are ongoing. But within the dialogue and the attempt to stradle two cultures, there usually remains a reverence for Indian values and experiences in the art work.

3. Turk, R. (1982). *Fritz Scholder*. New York: Rizzoli Inc. (p. 235)
4. Turk, R. (1982). *Fritz Scholder*. New York: Rizzoli Inc. (p. 114)

Studio Experience

After the slide presentation participants used pastels and colored construction paper to create their own symbolic images, inspired from the previous sensory experiences involving sight, sound, and fragrance. The participants were male and female art educators, Anglo and African-American. There were no Native Americans in the audience. The session concluded with the participants sharing their opinions about the total Native American aesthetic experience, raising questions, and describing their symbolic imagery to the group. Many participants expressed concern that there was not enough time left for more discussion. Because of time constraints and people from the next session arriving early for seats, I feel that proper closure was not achieved.

Twenty four illustratons emerged with a broad range of colors, geometric and floral designs, abstract shapes, representational birds and animals, masks, a few human figures, and symbols such as crosses, feathers, sun motifs, God's eyes, and mandalas. A few pictures included phrases or titles. The dominant themes were mythical birds, animals or sea creatures in nature settings, in flight, or floating in space surrounded by organic or geometric shapes.

As an art therapist, I have been trained that interpretation of art work is more relevant when the client/artist engages in dialogue with the art therapist. With that in mind I want readers to know that my description and analysis of some of the selected examples is hampered by little or no dialogue with the artist/art educator. I want to describe a few of the symbolic imagery that I was personally attracted to.

The first example (fig. #1) is a sun, moon, or some type of celestial sphere dominating the top half of the orange construction paper. Below that is a figure that appears to be human with raised arms and wide spread legs. Like the round celestial shape at the top of the page, the humanoid figure is surrounded by what appear to be rays. In between the figure's legs and chest there appears to be another figure with either two large eyes or two large breasts and nipples. The main colors are red, yellow, and orange with some black and blue outlining. Between the large round shape and the figure is a yellow haze and surrounding the celestial shape is a brown haze.

Only the artist can be sure of the exact symbolism. For me the round shape could be a medicine wheel, i.e., the circle of life or it could be the sun, nourishing the earth. The figure with raised arms could be dancing or praying. In many Native traditions dancing and prayer can be simultaneous actions as in the Lakota Sun Dance ceremonies. What is important to me as an art therapist and art educator is that the exploration of Native American sensory experiences enabled the artist to create a rich, highly symbolic image that hopefully has personal beneficial meaning for both the artist and spectators.

In figure #2 a horse is running across a landscape that appears to be in the sky. The horse is surrounded by a blue and green cloud like shape. Below the cloud is green grass and above the cloud shape are pale yellow rays. A black stirrup is in the horse's mouth and a thin sketchily drawn black figure is riding the horse. Below the horse's legs are blue wavy lines that remind me of ocean waves or ripples.

The image attracted me because the horse appears to be in the sky inside a cloud. Since the horse is not earthbound, I imagined it to be a spirit horse. People who believe in a spirit world may agree with my interpretation. Others may think it is a dream image. Once again, the importance is not the exact interpretation. What is important is for people to have stimulating sensory experiences that can be transmitted into an art form.

This exploration of Native American symbolism utilizing traditional and contemporary music and dance examples, the sense of smell, visual art examples, and art materials to inspire creative production is applicable to many age groups and populations. I have used it with various modifications in special education art classes K-12, regular art education classes and in my university art classes. People of all races seem to enjoy the experience and find it easy to create personal symbols. It is a method of introducing Native American culture that is respectful of traditions. By focusing on contemporary Native American music, dance, and visual art, I try to dispel the stereotype of the "vanishing Indian."

Conclusion

Today's Native American artists are still involved in the production of paraphrenalia that establishes and renews relationships between humanity, nature, and the animal world. The Native American aesthetic experience has survived colonialism, forced servitude, racial discrimination, and rapid technological changes.

I have been asked by a reviewer why I use the terms Indian art, Native American art, and Amerindian art. Are they interchangeable? What is the "correct" designation? Such questions are complex and beyond the scope of this article. But I will digress a little.

Racial nomenclature in the Americas developed under colonialsim and racism. Racial identification is a controversial issue for indigenous Americans, especially those of mixed ancestry. The word "Indian" is used to classify groups of people in Asia, the West Indies, and North/South America. Some indigenous groups in the Americas prefer to be called Native American, others Amerindian. Dr. Jack Forbes, director of Native American Studies at the University of California-Davis, feels that progress is needed in the field of human rights to correct, "a major area of abuse: the arbitrary and often racist practice of defining the identities of other human beings by powerful outsiders, as well as by governments and institutions."[5]

Forbes feels that revisions are needed in the history of race relations and in the study of modern African, Afroamerican, and Native American cultures.

Until such time I will continue to use the terms Native American art, Indian art, and Amerindian art interchangeably. As I stated earlier, the Native American aesthetic experience has survived colonialism, racial discrimination, and rapid technological changes.

Despite regional and tribal diversity, there exists a spiritual unity among Native Americans that is manifested in the arts. The creative process in which artists transform visions is viewed as part of life's mystery. It is one of the reasons that Indian art is inseparable from religion, philosophy, and healing. Music, dance, and ritual are the core of the Native American

5. Forbes, J. (1989). *Black Africans & Native Americans*. New York: Basil Blackwell Inc. (p. 5)

aesthetic experience. They form and focus visual art forms, which are only paraphrenalia in the holistic realm of tribal rites. Rituals, ceremonies, and visual symbols establish and renew relationships between humankind, nature, and the animal world. Time is ignored in favor of continuity. It is not intellectual, but comes from the heart (Coe, 1986). Let us share this rich heritage with our art students.

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List of Illustrations

1. This photograph should be placed in a vertical position with the round shape on top . A detailed description of the image is in the section, Studio Experience (Drawing by NAEA participant).
2. This photograph is also in a vertical position and is described in the section, Studio Experience (Drawing by NAEA participant).
3. The original photograph of the female powwow dancers is in your possession. The #'s are used for identification purposes in dance contests. Figure #43 is Greyfox (Cherokee/Seneca) and #44 is Rose Marie Tullio (Wyandot). If I gave additional information about this photo in my previous letter you may include that also.
4. Horizontal photograph. Members of the Southern Plains Singers. From left to right in dance regalia, Bobby Red Rose (Cherokee), center person is Berkman Dufrene (my spouse-Houma), and on the right, Don Neconie (Kiowa).